McCLURG BUILDING

218 South Wabash Avenue
Chicago, Illinois

Preliminary Staff Summary of Information
Originally Submitted to the Commission on Chicago Landmarks
May, 1969
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McCLURG BUILDING

(originally known as the Ayer Building)
218 South Wabash Avenue
Chicago, Illinois

Dates of Construction: 1898-1900

Architects: William Holabird & Martin Roche

Over the last century, Chicago has become famous for the contributions of its citizens in the realms of architecture and literature. The work of such nationally and internationally prominent writers and journalists as Eugene Field, Upton Sinclair, and Carl Sandburg, as well as the buildings designed by William LeBaron Jenney, Adler & Sullivan, Holabird & Roche, Burnham & Root, and Frank Lloyd Wright, have established a distinctive character and prominent place for Chicago in the context of American culture. While the activities of the writer and the architect can be compared in their spirit and intent, they are, in their production, physical nature, and public presentation, entirely independent of one another. Consequently, there are few places where the literary and architectural legacy of the city share a site of common importance. One such rare location is found in the building at 218 South Wabash, commonly known as the McClurg Building. Designed by one of the most important firms associated with the style known as the Chicago School, the building exemplifies this commercial type. For many years the home of a bookstore and publishing house, it served as an informal gathering place for writers and journalists, where ideas and comradery were shared and discussions were subsequently carried into print.

The architects of the McClurg Building were William Holabird and Martin Roche whose firm was among the most prominent designers of commercial buildings in late nineteenth and early twentieth century Chicago. William Holabird (1854-1923) was born in New York, the son of an officer in the U. S. Army. Following in his father's footsteps, he was appointed to the military academy at West Point and graduated in 1873, the same year his parents moved to Chicago. His interest in engineering and architecture, and word from his family of the building activity following the Great Fire of 1871, induced Holabird to resign his commission in 1875 to move to Chicago, where he was hired for his engineering experience by the prominent architect William LeBaron Jenney. While in Jenney's office Holabird met Ossian C. Simonds, an architect and landscape designer, with whom he eventually founded the new firm of Holabird & Simonds in 1880.

Martin Roche (1855-1927) was a native of Cleveland who settled in Chicago with his parents in about 1860. In 1873, he finished a four-year apprenticeship with a cabinetmaker while concurrently attending classes at an art school. After the Fire, he had decided to pursue a career in architecture and was hired by Jenney as a designer. In 1881, Roche left Jenney's office to join his former associates under the name of Holabird, Simonds & Roche. The name of the firm changed again in 1883 when Simonds withdrew to pursue an independent career in landscape design. The firm of Holabird & Roche continued under the direction of its principals from 1883 to 1923, becoming one of the most prolific design firms in the city. After the death of Holabird in 1923 and of Roche in 1927, the firm was reorganized under the direction of Holabird's son, John A. Holabird (1886-1945), in partnership with John Wellborn Root, Jr. (1887-1963), son of the former partner of Daniel Burnham. The office has retained an active and prominent practice under the name of Holabird & Root since that time.

The partnership of Holabird & Roche was extraordinarily productive, being responsible for the design of seventy-two major buildings within the central commercial area of Chicago during the forty-year period that its founders oversaw the office. While there seems to have been no strict delineation of responsibilities between the partners, Holabird tended to concentrate on engineering and business matters while Roche was in charge of design, including furniture, fixtures, and the decorative features of their buildings.

By experimenting with and exploiting the structural and aesthetic potential of the new steel-frame construction methods, Holabird & Roche became noted as the designers of many of Chicago's most prominent skyscrapers. Beginning with the Tacoma Building of 1887, which is no longer standing, they designed a series of early high-rise structures that were noted by contemporaries for their innovations, including: the Marquette Building and the southern portion of the Monadnock Building, both designed in 1893 and designated as Chicago Landmarks; the Old Colony Building of 1894, a designated Chicago Landmark; the Gage Buildings of 1898, which are currently under recommendation for designation; the Champlain Building of 1903; and the Chicago Building of 1904. Later structures designed by this firm, all of which have also been designated Chicago Landmarks, include the Chicago City Hall/Cook County Courthouse Building of 1905-07, the Oliver Building of 1908, and the Three Arts Club, built in 1914.

A seven-story building had been built on the future site of the McClurg Building in 1890. Occupied by A. H. Andrews and Company, purveyors of office furnishings, it was initially owned by Simon and Elizabeth Florsheim who sold it to Frederick Ayer of Lowell, Massachusetts, for $225,000 in 1895. Ayer was the heir to a railroad and real estate fortune accumulated by his father, James Cook Ayer, founder of the Lowell & Andover Railroad.

The building Ayer bought on Wabash Avenue was severely damaged by fire early in 1898, prompting him to demolish its remains and make plans for a new structure. By June of 1898, an announcement in *The Brickbuilder* confirmed that Holabird & Roche had been hired to design a new and taller building for the site. Construction was started in the fall, and the new nine-story structure, originally named the Ayer Building, was completed and ready for its major tenant, A. C. McClurg & Company, to occupy the first two stories in June, 1899.

skeleton of steel, it stands on pile foundations except along its south wall where caissons filled with concrete were used, due to the concerns of the owners of the neighboring structure. Its interior spaces were designed to be open and are interrupted only by two rows of columns. Spaced at intervals of seventeen feet, six inches, the columns do not interfere with the flexibility of the interior spaces, allowing numerous changes over time, including the removal of nearly all of the original interior doors, fixtures, and partitions. The floors are supported on steel beams that span the distances from wall-to-column and column-to-column, and are insulated from fire with terra-cotta tile.

The facade is divided vertically into three sections, each of which is one bay wide and includes one "Chicago window" per floor. Engaged fluted columns define the bays and extend from the top of the first floor to the tops of the ninth floor windows. In contrast to the massive aspect that piers would have presented, the narrow dimensions and fluted surface of the columns soften the appearance of the facade. The juxtaposition of the columns with the broad, recessed horizontal spandrels and the expansive windows further removes emphasis from the structure and contributes to the feeling of openness. The simplicity of the designs of the columns and window frames is continued in the spandrels which are rectangular panels with simple moldings. The sills, lintels, and other framing elements of the windows have the same beveled design used on the columns, and these are repeated with no variation on each floor above the first. Originally, the facade was crowned with a richly-decorated, terra-cotta cornice which has long since been removed.

The simplicity and openness of the facade directly reflects the rectangular grid of the structural steel frame. The terra-cotta and glass wall has here been reduced to little more than a envelope that shields the structure and interior spaces from the elements. The functional, inexpensive, and restrained aesthetic treatment of this facade marks the culmination of Holabird & Roche's experimentation with the formal and decorative problems presented by the skyscraper. The absence of ornament in imitation of historic styles, the use of modern materials, and the honest expression of the underlying skeletal structure give this building an elevation that is uniquely evocative of the Chicago School and singularly demonstrative of the work of Holabird & Roche.

In spite of the fact that it was officially named the Ayer Building upon its completion, the name of its major tenant, A. C. McClurg, appeared prominently on the structure from the time it opened. General Alexander C. McClurg (d.1901) was known as a scholar and soldier, having spent over fifteen years in the military. Enlisting as captain of a volunteer Union infantry unit in 1862, he served under General William Tecumseh Sherman and participated in the famed "march to the sea" of 1864. Discharged from the service as a colonel in 1877, he later organized the first permanent National Guard unit in Illinois and was promoted to the rank of general in the reserves. An avid and life-long reader, McClurg was noted for having carried a copy of *A Golden Treasury of English Verse* with him throughout the conflict. After the war he became a regular contributor to a number of periodicals, including the *Atlantic Monthly*. McClurg's historic and literary interests were well known and were reflected in his service as vice-president of the Chicago Historical Society and his appointment to the first board of trustees of the newly incorporated Newberry Library in 1892.

After settling in Chicago in 1877, McClurg became a principal with Egbert Jansen in Jansen, McClurg & Company, booksellers and stationers. By 1886, Jansen had left the firm which from that time was known simply as A. C. McClurg & Company. The success of the store allowed him to establish a publishing business on the side, and this endeavor was in turn successful enough to include McClurg in a list of Chicago's most prominent publishers in 1895. When the building his store occupied at the corner of Wabash and Adams streets was targeted for demolition in 1899, McClurg moved his businesses to the newly completed Ayer Building. It was during these years, roughly from 1885 through McClurg's death in 1901, that the bookstore was a center for literary and journalistic activity in Chicago.

Among the figures who frequented McClurg's establishment at these two locations was Eugene Field, a journalist who wrote on literary topics and authored the popular "Sharps and Flats" column for the *Chicago Daily News.* Another was the Reverend Frank Gunsaulus, author of the popular novel *Monk and Knight.* The presence of the Reverend Gunsaulus at the frequent noon-time gatherings at McClurg's prompted the group's nickname as the "Saints and Sinners Corner." The activities of this group were chronicled in Field's column, gaining for them and their host a degree of local fame. Field and McClurg eventually had a falling out over these columns, with McClurg blaming Field for painting a picture of the group that implied that their activities were "an offence against the dignity of literature."

The contributions made by Alexander C. McClurg to the local literary scene were commemorated in 1921 when a short street between East Grand Avenue and East Huron Street in Streeterville was renamed McClurg Court in his honor. General McClurg's death in 1901 ended the first phase of literary activity at the site, even though the bookstore was continued by his junior partner, Frederick B. Smith. Smith ran the business until 1911, when the general's son, Ogden Trevor McClurg (1878-1926), was named president of the company. Ogden T. McClurg was a Yale-educated entrepreneur with an active interest in the real estate market of Chicago. Owner of the Lake Shore Building Company, later called the McClurg Building Corporation, he was responsible for developing the first high-rise residential buildings along the lake shore in Streeterville.

The building occupied by A. C. McClurg & Company remained in the hands of Frederick Ayer and his heirs until October, 1926, when it was bought by the McClurg Building Corporation. It was known officially as the McClurg Building from that time until about 1950, when it passed into new ownership. It has since been known variously as the Crown Building and the Pakula Building.

The McClurg Building has associations with important individuals in the spheres of literature and journalism, as well as in architecture, and represents the era when local practitioners in these fields established a national reputation. The prominence that Chicagoans gained in these areas is not limited to the distant past but has continued in the work of individuals such as Nelson Algren, Cyrus Colter, and Mike Royko, and in that of Mies van der Rohe, Bruce Graham, and Helmut Jahn. In this context, the McClurg Building exemplifies the diversity and wealth of the cultural heritage of Chicago, and is representative of the longevity of its significant contributions to the cultural life of the nation.

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Additional research material used in the preparation of this report is on file at the office of the Commission on Chicago Landmarks and is available to the public.

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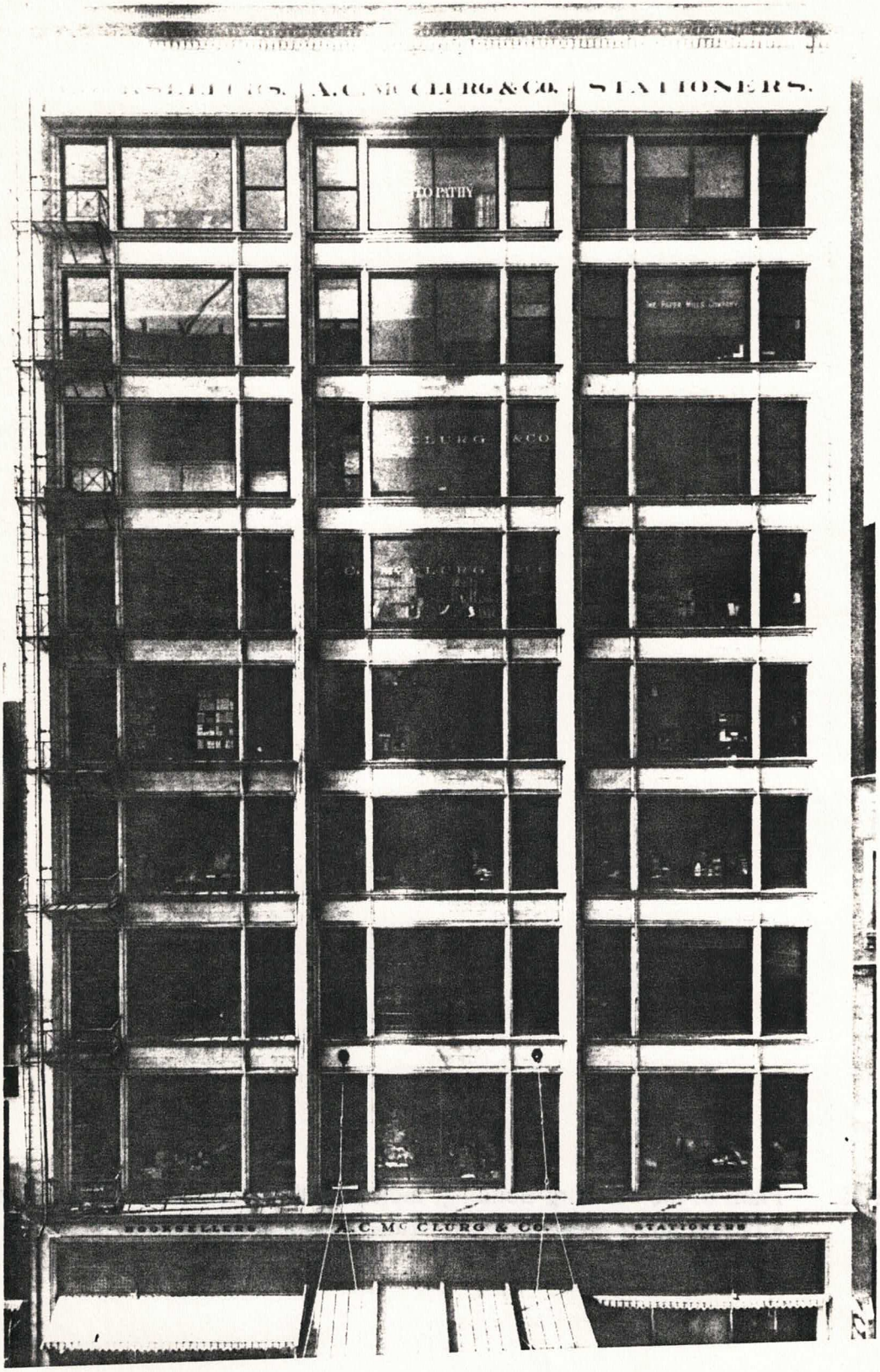
Staff for this publication

Timothy N. Wittman, research and writing

Figure 1: View of the McClurg Building shortly after it was completed, c.1900. The name of A.C. McClurg & Company was clearly evident on the facade and windows of the structure from the time it was completed. *(Photograph by the Commercial Photographic Company)*


A. C. McCLURG & Co.
STATIONERS.
BOOKSELLERS
A. C. McCLURG & CO.
STATIONERS

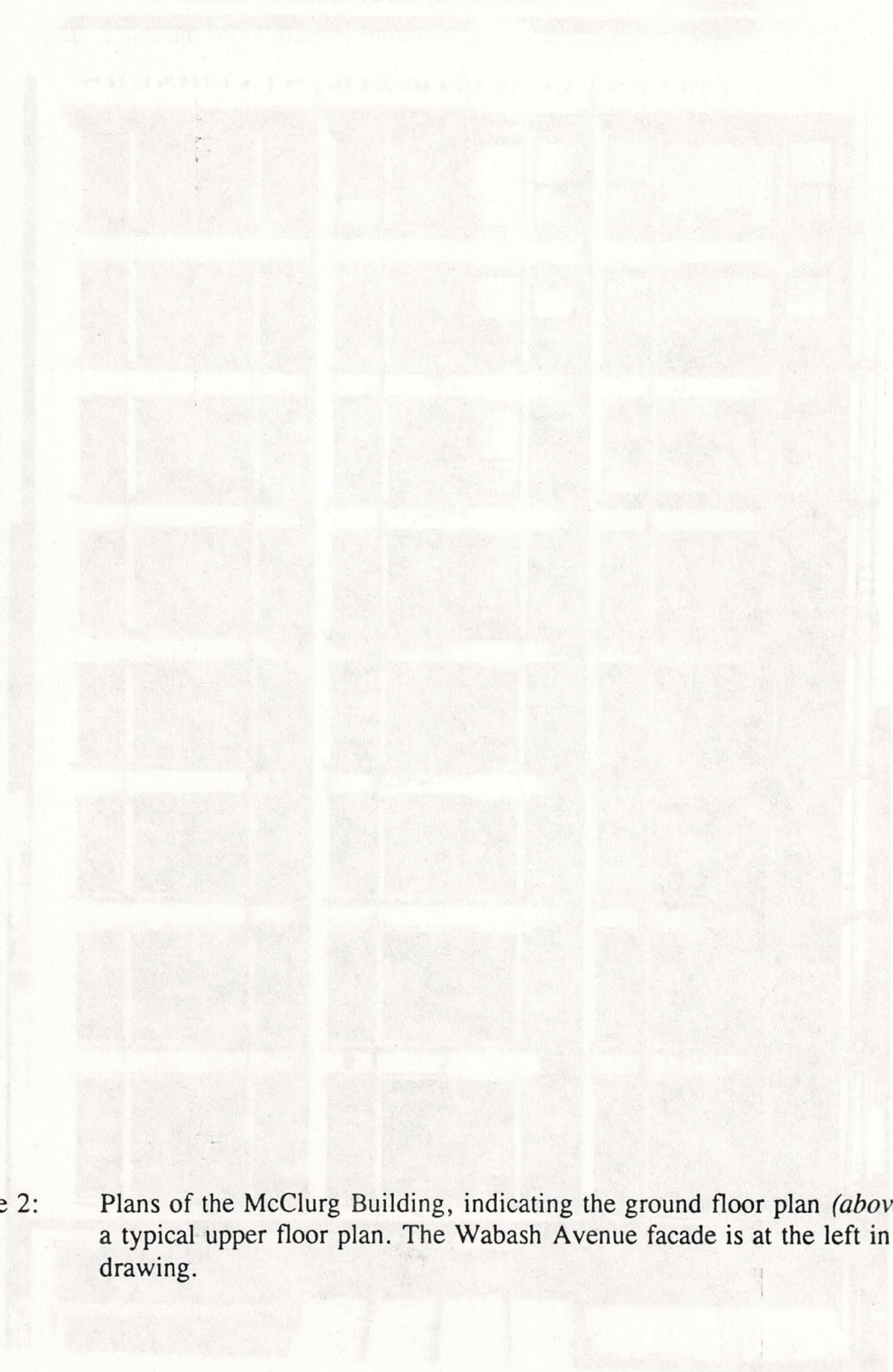


Figure 2: Plans of the McClurg Building, indicating the ground floor plan *(above)* and a typical upper floor plan. The Wabash Avenue facade is at the left in this drawing.

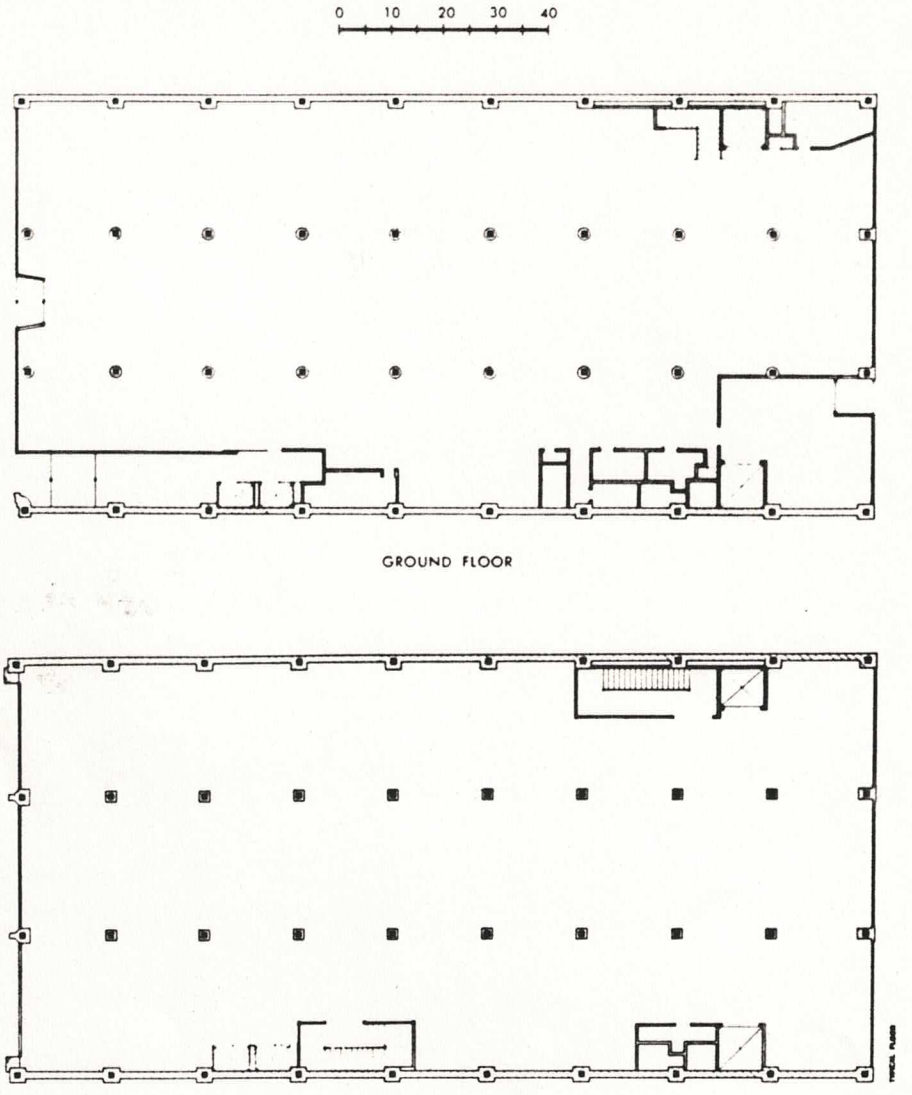
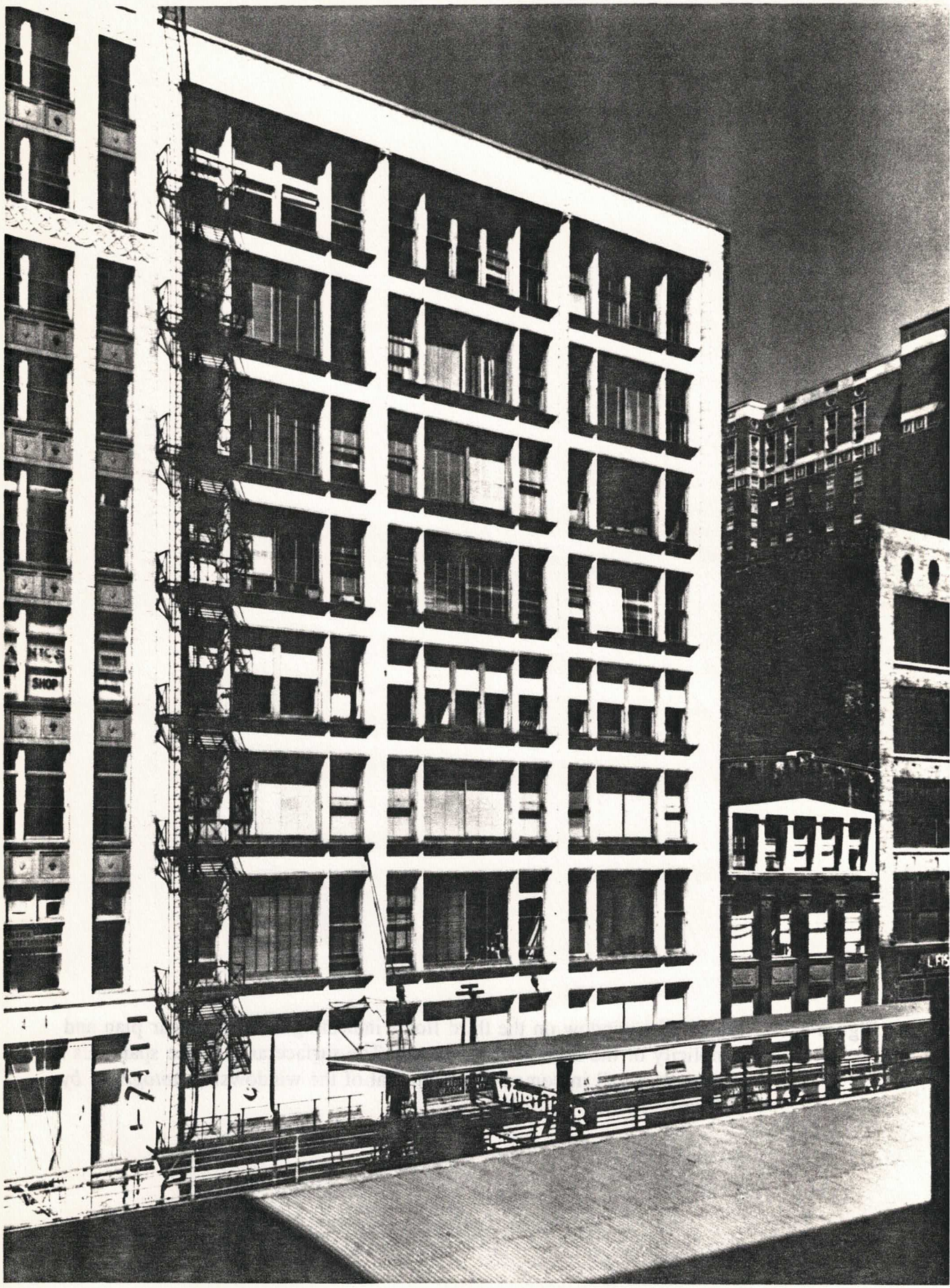

0 10 20 30 40
GROUND FLOOR
TYPICAL FLOOR

Figure 3: View of the McClurg Building taken c.1970. Although the cornice has been removed and some of the Chicago Windows, particularly on the fifth and ninth floors, were replaced with double-hung sash, the building retains most of its original details and has suffered a minimum of exterior alterations. *(Photograph by Richard Nickel)*


SHOP

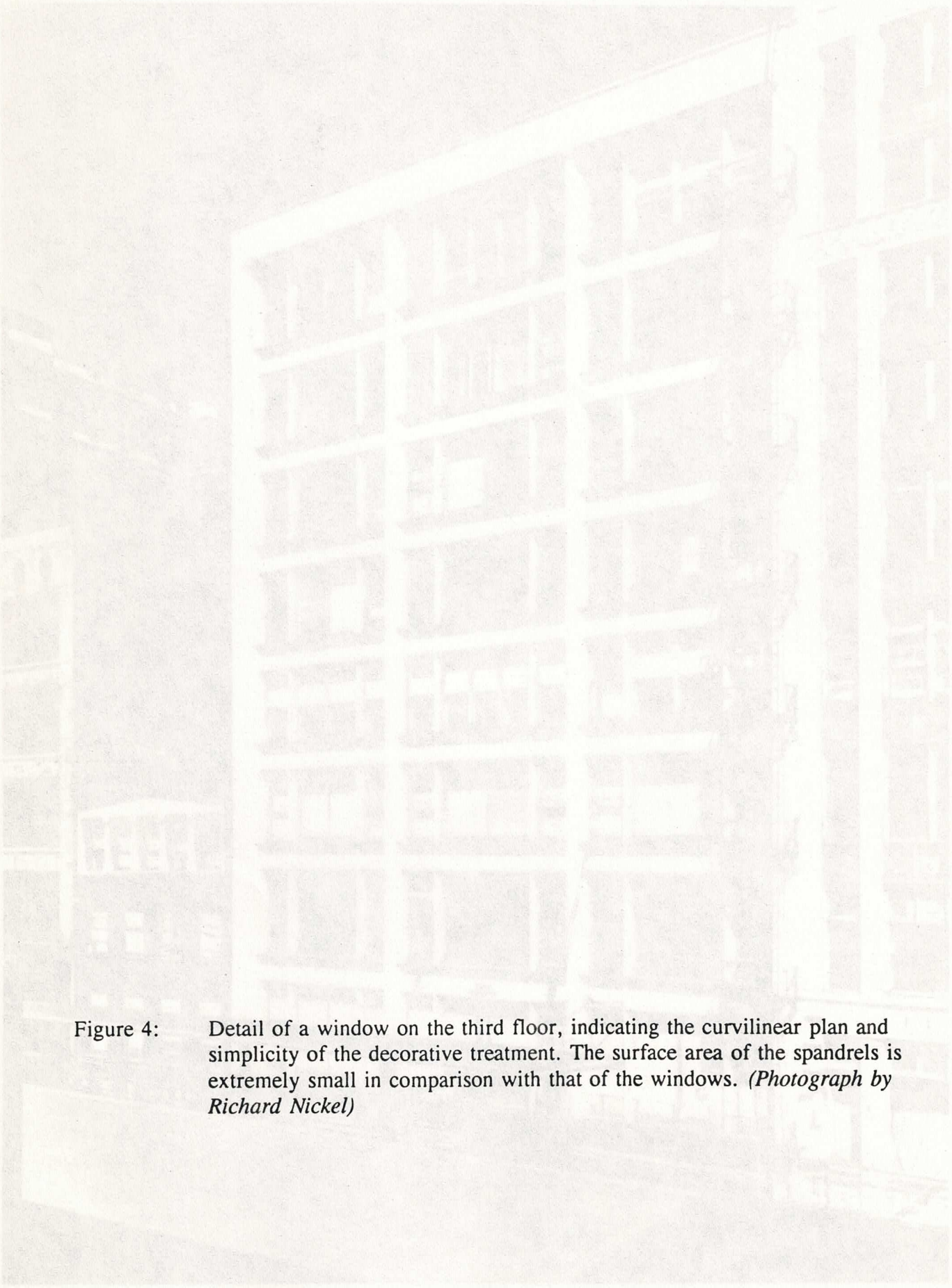
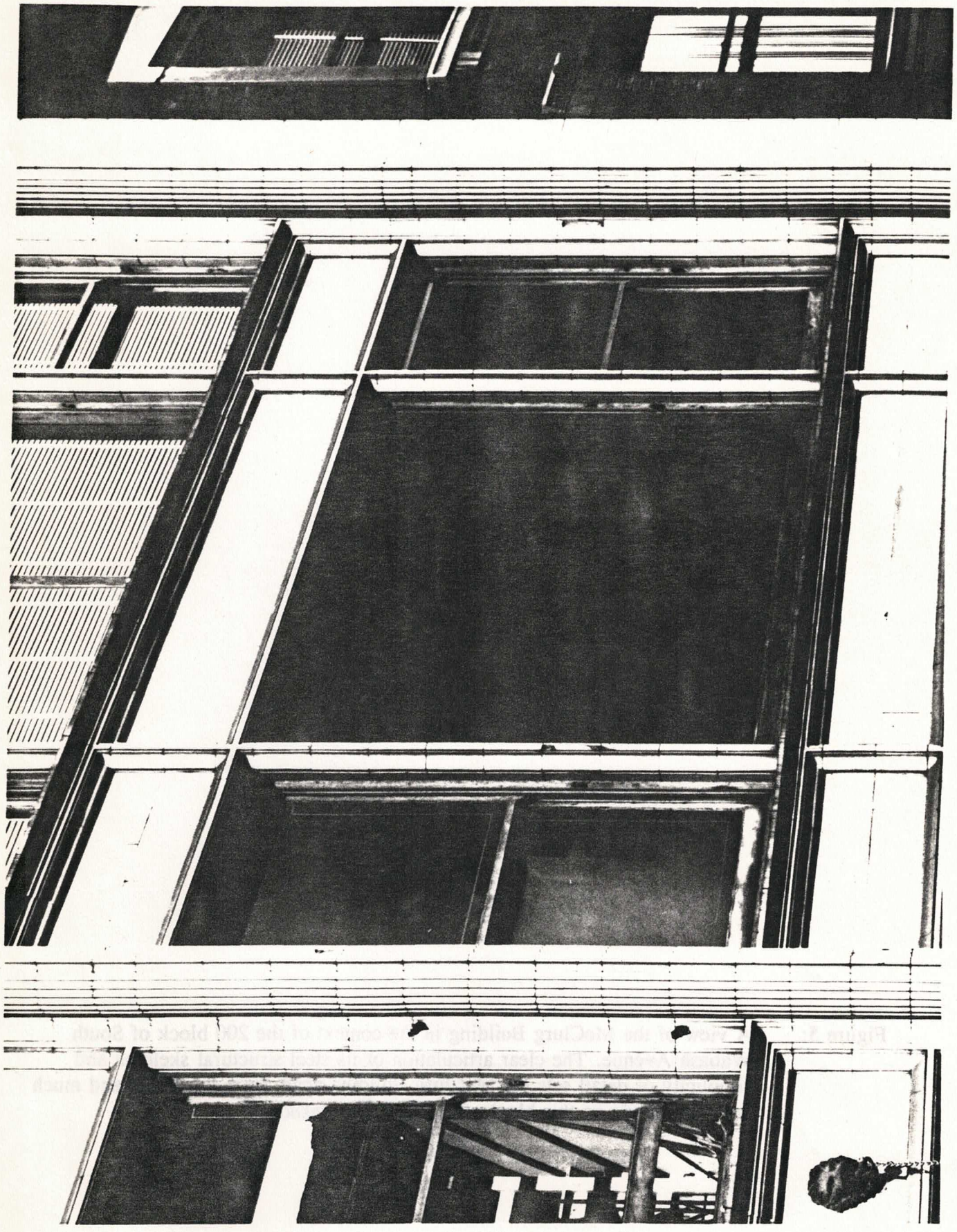


Figure 4: Detail of a window on the third floor, indicating the curvilinear plan and simplicity of the decorative treatment. The surface area of the spandrels is extremely small in comparison with that of the windows. *(Photograph by Richard Nickel)*



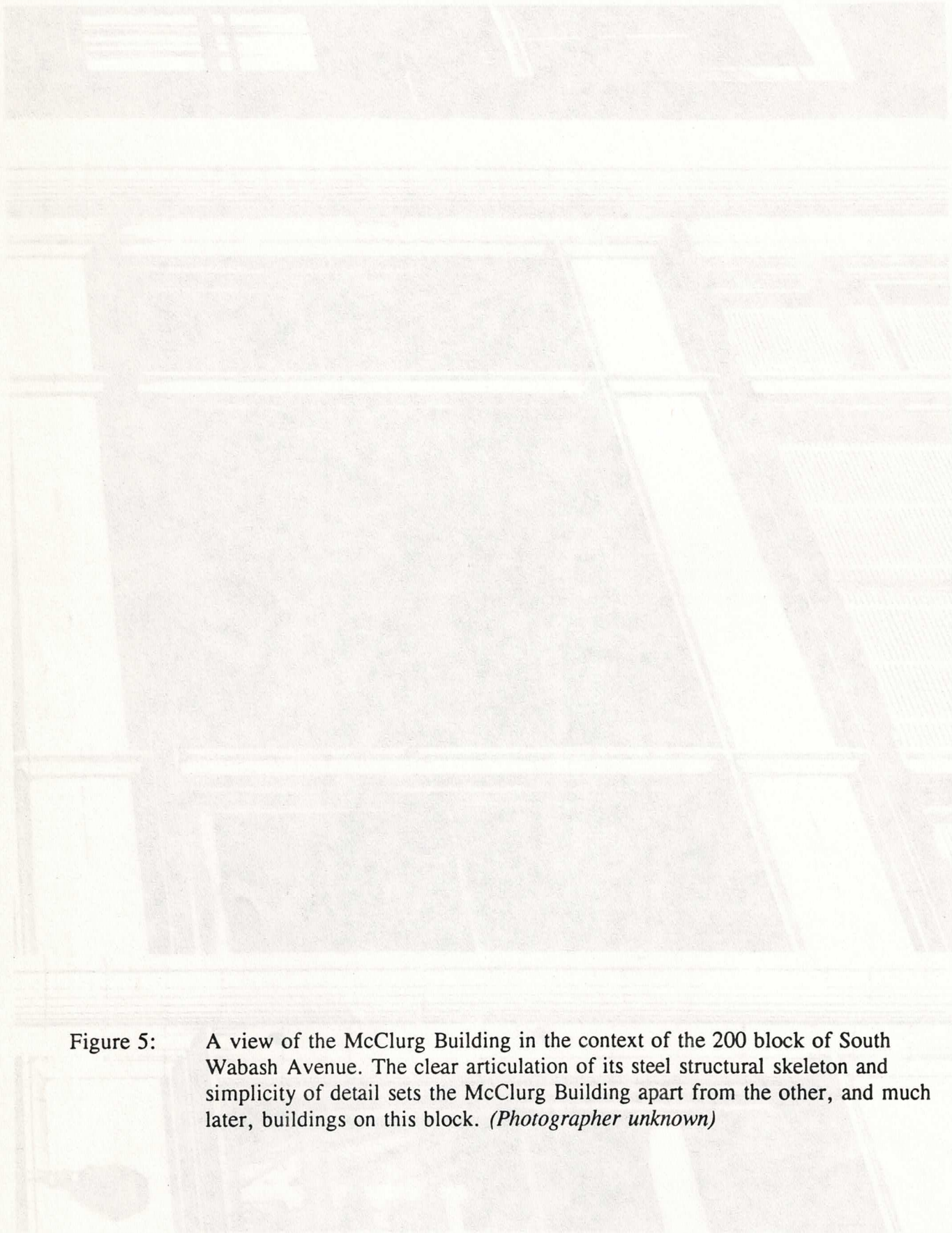


Figure 5: A view of the McClurg Building in the context of the 200 block of South Wabash Avenue. The clear articulation of its steel structural skeleton and simplicity of detail sets the McClurg Building apart from the other, and much later, buildings on this block. *(Photographer unknown)*

STEGER
BLDG.
CHOICE OFFICE SPACE

The Commission on Chicago Landmarks was established in 1968 by city ordinance, and was given the responsibility of recommending to the City Council that specific landmarks be preserved and protected by law. The ordinance states that the Commission, whose nine members are appointed by the Mayor, can recommend any area, building, structure, work of art, or other object that has sufficient historical, community, or aesthetic value. Once the City Council acts on the Commission's recommendation and designates a Chicago Landmark, the ordinance provides for the preservation, protection, enhancement, rehabilitation, and perpetuation of that landmark. The Commission assists by carefully reviewing all applications for building permits pertaining to the designated Chicago Landmarks. This insures that any proposed alteration does not detract from the qualities that caused the landmark to be designated.

The Commission makes its recommendations to the City Council only after extensive study. This preliminary summary of information has been prepared by the Commission staff and was submitted to the Commission when it initiated consideration of the historical and architectural qualities of this potential landmark.

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